STATEMENT BY BARBARA JO GRIFFIN, SUPERINTENDENT, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, FIELD HEARING CONCERNING THE FLOOD RECOVERY EFFORTS IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK.

MARCH 22, 1997

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules, and spring recess, to visit Yosemite to see firsthand the work we have been doing. I appreciate the opportunity to testify about how the National Park Service is responding to the recent flooding in Yosemite National Park.

As 1996 came to a close, Yosemite held a particularly heavy snowpack. On January 1st, 1997, a warm tropical storm moved into California. Heavy rains fell throughout the park. The combination of warm weather and widespread prolonged rain over a deep snowpack caused flooding at lower elevations. Particularly hard hit was Yosemite Valley. On January 2, much of the Valley was transformed into a large lake. At that time approximately 900 park visitors and 1,200 employees were trapped on three islands within the Valley. Employees and residents in El Portal, the primary administrative support facility for the park, were isolated and cut off from the Valley.

The natural environment of the park is adapted for periodic flooding. The structures and infrastructure we have built in the park are not so well adapted. As the water started to

recede on January 3rd the full impact of the flood began to emerge. The sewer line that runs from Yosemite Valley to the waste water treatment plant in El Portal was inoperable. A 300 foot section of the line was completely obliterated, and large sections of the remainder of the system were inundated with flood waters. This caused raw sewage to flow into the Merced River or out onto the Valley floor. As the water receded, the sewer lines became clogged with debris. The flood also disabled the electrical systems that operate the sewage pumps in the Yosemite Creek lift station, rendering the pumps inoperative. In addition, all three of the Valley's water wells were submerged. As a result, the Valley's potable water supply reached dangerously low levels. Three of the four support legs on a tower carrying the 69,000 volt high voltage line feeding Yosemite Valley were damaged. The tower tipped at a precarious angle, threatening the Valley with a loss of power. The water reached a depth of 8 feet in 189 rental cabins and 172 motel rooms at the Yosemite Lodge, as well as in the living quarters for 224 concession employees. Only one of the three access roads remained passable. And still there were 2,100 people in the Valley.

Elsewhere in the park damage was just as severe. In El Portal the water system was severely damaged, forcing residents to use only bottled water. The sewer line to employee housing in a trailer village was destroyed. Highway 140 leading into the park and to Mariposa was impassable. Several other key roads through the community were destroyed or severely damaged, limiting movement. In Wawona the damages threatened the potable water supply. Highways 41 and 120 had debris on the roads and significant structural damage.

Late on January 3rd, the 900 visitors were evacuated by convoy. As we began to understand the full magnitude of the repair and cleanup work we took action. To start we immediately requested a Type 1 Incident Command Team to come to the park to manage the emergency repair operations. Secondly, we knew that it was going to take weeks, if not months, to get the park back into full or partial operation. With this realization, and the impact it would have on local economies, we immediately started to talk with leaders of the local community, including members of the congressional delegation. Third, as it became clear that the damaged utility system could not support the 1,200 employees that were living in the Valley, we asked Yosemite Concession Services on January 4th to evacuate 500 of its employees. We also took a thorough look at the number of NPS employees that needed to be in the Valley. Many employee dependents and non-emergency staff voluntarily left the Valley. By the end of the first week of January the overnight population of Yosemite Valley was reduced to approximately 300 emergency personnel.

From this point one of our main goals was to make the park safe for a reopening. By January 21st it was safe to open the southern end of the park, including the Mariposa Grove, Wawona and some backcountry trailheads. Shortly thereafter we opened the area between Chinquapin and Badger Pass, and then the northern part of the park up to Crane Flat. Finally, we had completed enough emergency repairs by March 14 to open Yosemite Valley. Highway 140, however, remains closed. We will work on it until Memorial Day weekend so that it can be opened for the summer.

A tremendous amount of long-term repair and reconstruction that is dependant upon supplemental appropriations needs to be done throughout the park. To fully understand the scope of this work we needed a thorough and accurate picture of the damage. Expert assistance, at unprecedented levels, has enabled the park to compile a comprehensive and detailed inventory of the damage. After the water receded, engineers, architects, construction managers, and resource specialists from the National Park Service and the Federal Highway Administration began to assess the damage and develop alternatives for long-term solutions. By January 21st over 350 individual damage assessments with class C cost estimates had been completed. These cost estimates are based upon the actual cost of similar work that has been completed in the region. Several important factors have been taken into account in these cost estimates. The extent of flooding throughout California has caused the price for materials to increase; the damaged areas are a long way from the nearest community; and roads are damaged and subject to traffic delays. These three factors make it more difficult to get materials, equipment, and qualified contractors from the surrounding communities. It is standard practice in the construction industry to add a cost for this remoteness and this cost is reflected in our estimates.

We have identified most of the damage to park infrastructure that rests below 6,000 feet in elevation. The damage above this elevation, however, cannot be assessed, and will not be fully understood until late spring. Over 62 miles of main park highway, 4 minor and 2 major water and sewer systems, 235 seasonal housing units, and most of the park's 800-mile trail system,

are buried under snow. We do know that there are at least 30 damaged or destroyed trail bridges and one section of the Tioga Pass Road that is washed out. But other damage remains to be discovered as the snow melts.

The spring thaw is very much on our minds. At the moment the water content of the snowpack is approximately 200% of normal. There is a very real danger of another flood before this summer. If that occurs, long-term costs may rise and some of the emergency repairs, particularly to the roads, may not hold.

Though this flood has been devastating to many individuals and to the local economies, there are some benefits that will come from the effort to recover. Many of the structures and facilities that were destroyed or severely damaged were in the floodplain and areas of sensitive riparian habitat. Yosemite has a comprehensive nationally debated and supported General Management Plan that is guiding recovery efforts. Since the GMP was approved we have spent a lot of time working through the details of implementation. We have an approved Concession Services Plan. We have a draft Housing Plan that is currently undergoing public review. We are close to completing a draft Valley Implementation Plan that will be out for public review beginning in late April. Taken together, these long-term plans provide details about where infrastructure should be placed in Yosemite Valley. These plans identify the need to remove infrastructure from the floodplain for the purpose of protecting both natural resources and expensive taxpayer-owned park infrastructure.

In the process of moving these facilities we can make long-called-for improvements to visitor facilities and services. The flood recovery plans, damage assessments, and cost estimates are more definitive than you might expect after a major incident because they incorporate this work. Park facilities destroyed or damaged by the flood will be restored in scope, scale, and function to a condition that will not be damaged by a future flood of this magnitude. The added cost of relocation will be minimal compared to the cost of rebuilding in-place and then later relocating these facilities in accordance with the General Management Plan. Also, many of the facilities that will be replaced were substandard and already a part of the large backlog of work. The recovery effort will reduce this backlog.

Since the flood the public has been telling us to do the repair work in accordance with these plans and to do it quickly. To accomplish this we will need a supplemental appropriation.

What we are doing now and what the park will be like this summer.

We continue to manage the emergency, short-term, repair work under the Incident Command System. Short-term expenses have included: contracts with local companies for emergency services, repairs and construction; rental of equipment; temporary lodging; removal of flood debris; and overtime, along with travel and per diem costs for federal government employees and emergency hires. We anticipate that we will continue to manage the emergency short-term response under the Incident Command System until the end of May, or until funding for long-term contracting is received. Though we have significantly reduced the number of

emergency workers there are several ongoing functions that must continue during the short-term period. We need a finance team to coordinate procurement, payments, and track expenditures; a resource unit to manage and track people working on the incident; and a documentation unit to track the work that is accomplished. We expect the cost for the short-term, emergency response and repairs, to be $13,402,000.

The long-term repair and reconstruction work will be an enormous management challenge. To meet this challenge I have created a temporary A Flood Recovery Team@ to oversee contracts for repair and reconstruction activities. Comprised of existing park employees, this team will be overseen by a Project Manager, and will monitor and ensure that park resources are protected.

Park visitors will experience a different Yosemite in the near future. The extensive damage to a significant number of lodging units and campsites means that fewer overnight accommodations will be available in the park this summer. Some trailheads may be closed and others will have difficult stream crossings due to bridge damage. The damage that will be exposed by the melting of snow will also impact the visitor experience.

There is a lot of road work underway. Visitors this summer will encounter traffic delays and temporary closures throughout the park. Some areas previously used for parking will be transformed into staging areas for construction. Traffic congestion has been a problem in

Yosemite for many years. Fixing that problem is a main goal of the 17-year-old General Management Plan. Over the past five years we have tried to reduce the impact of traffic gridlock by instituting a Restricted Access Plan. Under this plan when gridlock is imminent we have closed the gates to automobile traffic until the congestion eased. In some cases this has taken up to 7 hours. The combination of road repair work and other construction, along with the reduction in the number of parking spaces, will create intolerable gridlock this summer unless a restricted access system is put in place.

The system we are considering is an emergency vehicle reservation system. Under this system visitors in private vehicles would need a reservation to drive into the park for day use. Visitors would not need a reservation if they had overnight accommodations in the park (including campgrounds or backcountry use) or were staying at private accommodations in Wawona, Yosemite West, or Foresta. Tran-Sierra traffic would also be exempted from the system's reservation requirement.

If implemented this system would limit the number of private vehicles entering the park for the day and would work in coordination with a shuttle bus system that would bring visitors to the park from gateway communities. The day-use system would be operated by a private company with an established track record in managing reservations. It would be funded by a service charge to visitors which would cover the cost of operating the system. An adjustment in the park entrance fee would be made to accommodate the service charge. To

obtain a reservation a person would simply call a toll-free phone number. With a reservation in hand, an individual would be assured of access to the park before he or she left home. We believe this proposed system is far better than forcing visitors to wait outside the park for intolerable lengths of time before they are allowed into the park. Since the number of reservations would be limited there would be an economic incentive for private industry to create and operate shuttle buses from gateway communities. It is important to note that the vehicle reservation system would be aimed at reducing the numbers of private vehicles that enter the park, not the numbers of people that wish to enter the park. There would be no restriction on the number of shuttle buses that may enter the park. We are currently working with these companies and the communities to try to coordinate this transportation system. One way we are trying to help is through a modification to the park entrance fee. The Secretary of the Interior is considering a proposal to reduce the per-head entrance fee for shuttle bus riders if the shuttle bus system is implemented this summer. The shuttle bus system would impact park resources to a far lesser degree than individual automobiles and should be encouraged. For this reason park admission should be less expensive for a person on a shuttle bus than in a private car.

The idea of limiting the number of vehicles that enter the park is advocated by the 1980 General Management Plan, and has been discussed for many years. The general public has repeatedly expressed support for this idea. However, concerns have been raised about this idea by individuals in our gateway communities. Before we would implement a long-term

system we are committed to thorough public review.

Unfortunately the flood has forced us to consider implementing an emergency system this year. In doing so we have met with representatives from the gateway communities to listen to their concerns. Several individuals suggested that local hotels be given a pool of day use reservations to distribute to their customers. This would not be fair to all of the people who want to visit the park. Because Yosemite is a national park and owned by all taxpayers, reservations should be available on an equal basis to all, on a first-call, first-served basis.

We support a vehicle reservation system because it will enhance our ability to protect park resources, and lead to a better experience for park visitors. When coupled with a shuttle bus system, it will also provide business opportunities in the adjacent communities.

The flooding has provided us with a field test to confirm the wisdom of the plans for the future of Yosemite. We now have a chance to make long-called-for and widely supported changes in Yosemite. Nature has already begun a process that people have only talked about. We want to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Early this week the administration submitted an emergency supplemental request that included $176 million to repair the damage in Yosemite. Of this amount, $30 million would be available contingent upon a budget request from the President to Congress. These funds

would be set aside to give us time to work with the concessioner, Yosemite Concession Services, to determine the amount of its contractual obligation to replace or repair concession facilities.

Approximately $14 million would also be provided from the FHWA Emergency Relief Program to repair damage to the National Park Service's roads in Yosemite as a result of the flooding. In addition, the administration proposes to provide $21 million for a valley transportation system to be derived from 2 sources: a $10 million offset with funds rescinded from a Department of Energy program and an allocation of $11 million from the National Park Service's portion of the Federal Lands Highway Administration's program.

From the start we have been committed to opening the park as soon as possible. We continue to be concerned about the economic health of individuals and communities surrounding Yosemite. We want to restore facilities as quickly as possible. We want to do it right.

I would like to thank all of the employees of the National Park Service and all our partners, for their hard work and perseverance during and after the flood. The employees of Yosemite Concession Services were a great help throughout the past several months, and through the hardships, performed above and beyond the call of duty. I would also like to thank the State of California, particularly Caltrans and the Highway patrol for their assistance. Special recognition must be given to California's Type I Incident Command Team, the NPS Type I All Risk Management Team, the Federal lands Highway Program and the Denver Service

Center. I would also like to thank Madera and Mariposa Counties and the towns of Oakhurst, Mariposa, and Groveland for their help.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.